



For Parents of young children

Do You Expect Too Much?

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA ■ AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

A young mother was trying to do some baking while her little daughter took her afternoon nap. But the child woke up right in the middle of the baking project. The mother's reaction? She scolded the child and told her she could have no cookies just because she got up too soon. Apparently, this mother expected her daughter to sleep as long as it suited *her* convenience, to *know* when not to interfere with mother's activities.

Do young parents expect too much too soon, especially from their first children? And do parents expect too much of themselves as well as their children?

Let's examine some of the times when you might be expecting too much of your children and of yourself.

Your Job

Do you take into account the actual hours you spend each day caring for your children? Most parents plan their days almost as though their children did not exist. Then, at the end of the day, they are discouraged because they did not accomplish all they planned.

Just stop and consider the hours you spend feeding, dressing, and cleaning up after your children. One study reported that mothers whose youngest child was 1 year old or younger spent 2 hours a day on their children's physical care and mothers whose youngest child was 2 to 5 years old spent 1 hour a day.

Note that these hours were required for physical care only—they did not include hours spent playing with or reading to children. Facing the fact that you must set aside a certain number of hours each day just for your children's physical needs should help you plan realistically what you can do in one day.

And, too, you must plan your day with plenty of leeway for interruptions. You cannot expect your children to take long naps every day or always be content to play by themselves, so learn to accept interruptions as part of a normal day.

Developmental Tasks

Children experience developmental tasks that can be classified in four general areas: social, physical, emotional, and mental. Each child learns and develops in these areas at different times and at different rates.

Developmental Tasks—Social

Do you expect your child to be quiet and not disturb the family with noise?

Or do you lean to the other side and put up with a din from morning till night? Quietness is a difficult idea to teach and a hard thing for a young child to learn. However, allowing a child to "take over" the household at a young age may lead to even more disruption as he grows older.



Since little children do not realize how much noise they're making, it helps if adults can learn to shut their minds to some noise.

Children need plenty of activity to work off their great quantities of energy. A chance to climb or run out of doors allows them to let off steam and use up some of their energy. Some kind of vigorous activity each day is an aid in developing children's muscles and it makes them feel good too.

Do you expect your child to be "grownup" about sharing toys and meeting strangers?

Children have to *learn* to share. They grow from the early "I," "me," and "mine" stage to the more grownup "we," "us," and "our" stage. Learning to think in terms of others is a developmental concept that children usually learn when they are about 4.

Do you expect your child to banish his fears and meet strangers easily?

A child will accept new adults more easily if he has good relations with his own family. Opportunities to play with children other than his brothers and sisters can also help a child learn to meet strangers. Attending a play school several mornings a week, making a trip to a neighbor's home for a morning, or spending a couple hours in Sunday school each week are all important experiences in your child's social development.

Developmental Tasks—Physical

Do you expect your child to stay clean and neat?

Sometimes parents stress clean clothes, clean hands, and a clean house beyond the point that is comfortable for a child. Your child cannot conceive of degrees of dirtiness and he does not realize the work involved in doing the laundry. So your warning "Don't get dirty now" may fall on deaf ears. You can reduce the frustrations of trying to keep your children clean by buying clothes that launder easily and by dressing them suitably and comfortably.



Some parents curtail their children's activities to save wear and tear on expensive furnishings. Having many valuable possessions in your home may affect what you expect of your child. So try to keep the needs of preschool children in mind when you select furnishings.

Developmental Tasks—Emotional

Do you expect your child to be grown-up, to not "act like a baby?"

Parents often display inconsistent reactions to their children's physical and emotional development. When a child outgrows his clothing his parent may express disappointment that he is growing so fast and is no longer his little baby. But, on the other hand, this same parent may expect his child to exhibit grownup emotional behavior.

Or, a parent may tell a child who cries after receiving a bump, "Don't cry, only babies cry." But a more reasonable parental action would be to comfort the



child without much fuss. He eventually will learn to handle himself physically and emotionally.

Developmental Tasks—Mental

Do you expect your child to understand everything you say to him?

It is easy to believe that because a child can talk he also can understand. But, as in other areas of development, mental growth takes a long time. And the rate of mental growth varies from child to child.

Children really have two sets of words—one set that they only say and another that they understand. Your child comes to understand what words mean through specific experience with them. He may say "What's that?" You may reply, "A toaster." But if he can put a slice of bread in the toaster, see the bread become warm and brown, and learn that butter melts on it and that the toaster makes bread taste good, he has learned *what* a toaster is.

Teaching a child to understand time requires considerable patience. You may be wrapped up in a television program when your child asks for a drink. If your

"Just a minute" stretches into several minutes, your child will become impatient and will justifiably misunderstand the meaning of a minute. A child's limited understanding of the passing of time is one of the reasons why he finds it difficult to put off pleasures.

You can help your child learn new words by speaking clearly and distinctly to him and by listening carefully when he talks to you. When you speak to him, speak simply and directly. For example, "Dress now, play later" is much more meaningful to a small child than, "Stop fooling around and spending so much time getting into your clothes."

The tone of your voice can also convey to your child what you expect of him in most situations.

This letter suggests that you try to be understanding and fair about what you expect of your children.

References

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- ◇ In Public Affairs Pamphlets:
"What Should Parents Expect From Children?" No. 357. (25¢).
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"Three To Six." No. 163. (25¢).

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